

## **Chapter 11**

### **“Characteristics of Avoidance-of-Failure Behavior”**

We may fail to recognize avoidance-of-failure as a goal of misbehavior, since the student who is avoiding failure generally does not distract us or disrupt our classroom:

*Alberto is slumped in his chair in the corner of the last row. He hasn't once looked at the Spanish words Ms. Alvarez has written on the board. When she asks why he isn't copying the words in a notebook like the other students, Alberto avoids eye contact. He shrugs his shoulders and sinks farther down in his seat.*

*Ms. Alvarez worries about Alberto. He never responds to her questions in class or to her kind remarks between classes. His cumulative folder indicates he has the ability to learn Spanish, but his poor classwork and incomplete homework present a contrary picture. Ms. Alvarez would like to help Alberto someday. But for now, with so many rowdy and disorderly students to worry about, she's relieved that at least he doesn't add to the disturbance.*

Students like Alberto don't cause as much trouble as those who are seeking attention, power, or revenge. They tend to observe school rules and requirements. The problem is that they seldom interact with teachers and peers, choosing to remain isolated in the classroom, halls and lunchroom. Another problem is that adults may view these students as “transparent.” If we are not careful, we may look through these students as if they are nonexistent.

Sometimes a student needs to withdraw temporarily, to look within and regroup. Don't mistake temporary withdrawal for avoidance-of-failure behavior. Withdrawal becomes a problem when the student consistently engages in such behavior over a period of time, in ways that impede academic and social development.

#### **Active Avoidance-of-Failure**

Avoidance-of-failure isn't usually active. The problem seldom lies in what the student is doing but rather in what the student is not doing.

One active avoidance-of-failure behavior is the frustration tantrum. On the surface this tantrum resembles a temper tantrum: Young students kick and cry, older students pound the desk and utter unprintable words. The goal of each type of tantrum is different, however. The temper tantrum is an explosion designed to get the teacher to back off and submit to the student's demands. In contrast, the frustration tantrum is an implosion designed to let off steam and direct the focus away from an apparent or potential failure. Students who have frustration tantrums have set out to perform certain tasks but have been unable to succeed to their own satisfaction. Finally, out of sheer frustration, they turn up the vocal volume or collapse into tears, hoping that the emotional outburst will allow them to avoid facing their failure.

Another active avoidance-of-failure behavior is clowning or goofing off. Underneath these antics is the hope that teachers and classmates will focus on the surface behaviors and not even notice the fear underneath.

### **Passive Avoidance-of-Failure**

In most cases, students who seek to avoid failure exhibit this misbehavior passively.

#### Procrastination and Noncompletion

Some students—especially bright, capable youth—procrastinate to avoid failure. “I could have if I would have” is their motto. Most people have used this motto on a few occasions. Did you ever delay writing until the night before it was due? Then, if you received a C, what did you tell yourself? Probably something like this: “I’m really a good student, and I could have gotten an A if I had worked harder.” If instead you had worked for weeks on the paper and received a C, you might have thought, “Why not procrastinate and end up feeling like a winner, instead of working hard and feeling like a failure?”

Neglecting to complete projects and assignments is another variation of this passive avoidance-of-failure. Projects that are never finished cannot be judged or graded, so failure is impossible. I laughed when I learned about this kind of avoidance behavior because at the time I had a drawer of half-sewn garments. I believed that smart people sewed to avoid the high cost of clothing. I had told myself, “I’m really okay at this. Someday I’ll finish the clothes.” If I had actually finished the sewing and nothing had fit, I’d have had to tell myself, “I guess I’m really a failure at sewing.” By not completing the projects, I was able to continue feeling competent.

#### Temporary Incapacity

Some students avoid failure by developing temporary incapacities. For example, consider Morrie:

*Morrie is skilled academically but feels klutzy in physical education classes. When it’s time for phys. ed., he complains of a headache one time, stomach cramps the next—any ailment that might excuse him from a situation in which he expects to do poorly. Since he doesn’t participate, no one can judge his performance. It’s no surprise that Morrie’s illness disappears as soon as phys. ed. is over.*

#### Assumed Disabilities

The current emphasis on learning disabilities and attention-deficit disorder inadvertently helps students successfully carry out avoidance-of-failure behavior. The whole notion of disabilities, especially when drugs are used as part of the corrective procedures, feeds into a student’s notion of “I can’t” and provides a seemingly legitimate excuse to withdraw and quit trying.

Even the most astute diagnostician has difficulty differentiating between real and assumed disabilities. Some students are so good at pretending, even on tests, that teachers often wonder if students can’t or if they simply won’t. Frequently, the students themselves don’t really know. To make matters more confusing, some students who do

have a minor disability have learned to make it major. By appearing more disabled than they are, these students can keep teachers at bay and thus avoid more failure.

Some students do need special help to learn. Unfortunately, the labels schools apply to them tend to reinforce these children's notions of their inadequacies. What they need is to be taught with methods and materials adapted to their needs and to hear the message, "You can do it!" When they receive consistent encouragement, their self-esteem will grow and they'll have less need to work at avoiding failure.

### **How to Identify Avoidance-of-Failure Behavior**

We've learned three clues for distinguishing attention, power, revenge, and avoidance-of-failure goals: the reading on our emotional pressure gauge, our typical reaction, and the student's response to our correction.

Avoidance-of-Failure Clue 1: When faced with avoidance-of-failure behavior, our pressure gauge changes location, moving from deep inside our gut to our head. The readings on the gauge swing away from the mild-to-boiling scale. Instead of upsetting feelings like irritation, anger, and hurt, we'll feel professional concern, frustration, perhaps despair. We ask ourselves, "Why are our teaching strategies not working?" "Is there an undiagnosed learning disability?" Feeling that we simply can't get through to this student, we might even begin to doubt our own teaching ability.

Avoidance-of-Failure Clue 2: A typical reaction is to give up trying, feeling that we're up against a brick wall that we don't seem able to penetrate. We may seek a referral to the school support-service personnel as the only solution to the problem.

Avoidance-of-Failure Clue 3: When teachers give up trying and leave the student alone, the misbehavior doesn't stop temporarily (as with attention), nor does it intensify on the student's own terms (as with power or revenge). Rather, the young person's response is usually to continue to avoid the task at hand.

### **Origins of Avoidance-of-Failure Behavior**

A number of all-too-prevalent and educational factors contribute to students' choosing avoidance-of-failure behavior.

#### **Rule of the Red Pencil**

A long-accepted educational practice has been to mark students' mistakes in red pencil, with the number wrong clearly circled at the top of the page. Students know their mistakes are going to receive attention. Often everyone else in the class knows just how many mistakes they've made. No wonder some students simply decide not to do any work.

#### **Unreasonable Expectations**

When parents, teachers, or students have unreasonable expectations for success, avoidance-of-failure behavior soon follows. Realizing they can't reach the goal, students simply refuse to try. They'd rather be chastised for not making the effort than be branded "stupid" for trying and failing. They may see peers or siblings succeeding easily; when they compare their own stumbling efforts, they come up short. We may try to tell these students we'll be satisfied if they put forth their best effort, but they're not convinced. To

refuse to try is less damaging to their ego than to try to achieve results that might not be satisfactory.

### Perfectionism and Star Mentality

Students who strive to be perfect can't tolerate the slightest mistake. To them, an error isn't a normal part of the learning process but rather a tragedy to be avoided at all costs. How sad that so many bright, capable young people refuse to put forth any effort because they believe that only perfect performance is acceptable.

Society and schools usually recognize results, rarely the effort involved. The class valedictorian is honored for earning the highest grades, regardless of whether it took hard work to earn them. In contrast, who recognizes students like Tami, who went from a D-minus to a B-plus average by spending every afternoon with tutors? Or Whitney, who now comes to class on time and pays attention nearly the whole period?

### Emphasis on Competition

An emphasis on competition in the classroom is another reason some students adopt avoidance-of-failure behavior. If they have to be branded a winner or loser, they'd rather not play at all.

Some educators are champions of competition. They believe that competition motivates students to try harder and prepares them for real-life competition. But real-life competition differs from classroom competition, particularly in one major aspect: choice of arena. When we compete in the workplace, most of us are in our chosen field, doing work for which we have a preference and an aptitude—factors that give a competitive edge. For example, when I propose a book to a publisher, I know I'm competing against other authors, but I also know that I have the talent for writing such a book and hence a reasonable chance for success. I would never tell a clothing manufacturer, "I'd like to design dresses for you."

Students, however, are placed in a less fortunate position constantly. All day long, they're compared with other students in different subjects and skills, from math to English to social studies to science to physical education. They don't get to choose which subjects they'd like to compete in. They aren't allowed to say, "No thank you, Mr. Umbermeyer, I don't wish to compete in English today." So they speak with their behavior instead. They withdraw, isolate themselves, and refuse to try.

### Students' Legitimate Needs

When we closely examine avoidance-of-failure behavior, we find that students who choose these behaviors have some immediate needs they do not know how to satisfy in appropriate ways. Like all of us, these students need to believe in themselves and to feel successful in their daily lives. They need to believe they are smart enough that, with good teaching from us and a reasonable effort from them, they will be able to succeed academically.

### **Avoidance-of-Failure Behavior's Silver Lining**

For some students, ambition is the silver lining in avoidance-of-failure behavior. They want to succeed in school—if they can be assured of not making mistakes and of

achieving some status. With the right strategies, we can nurture this ambition and help the students change their behavior.

For many students with avoidance-of-failure behaviors, however, there is no silver lining. These students are too discouraged. They have incredibly low self-esteem, and they lack the support of friends. Since they have no resources for going it alone, they need and deserve immediate help.

### **Principles of Prevention**

Two principles of prevention are helpful for alleviating avoidance-of-failure behavior.

1. **Encourage an “I can” belief.** We must take every opportunity available to help these students change their self-perception from “I can’t” to “I can.”
2. **Foster friendships.** We can take an active role in ending failure-avoiding students’ isolation by drawing them into congenial relationships with us and with other students.

## **Chapter 12**

### **“When the Goal Is Avoidance-of-Failure: Interventions”**

We can rarely pinpoint the exact moment of avoidance-of-failure behavior since such behavior usually doesn't disrupt our lessons, distract our attention, or destroy property. Students who fear failure simply don't do their schoolwork, quietly hoping we won't notice. While we eventually need to help them connect and contribute to make a real difference in their school performance, our first step is to help these students feel capable and be successful.

Intervention techniques that help students feel capable can be grouped into ten strategies.

### **The First Five Strategies**

We'll begin with Strategies 1-5, which are specifically tailored to students who fear failure. The other five intervention strategies are also encouragement strategies. They are helpful for all children but particularly useful with students fearful of failure. Strategies 6-10 are summarized in this chapter and fully explained in Chapter 13.

#### **Strategy 1: Modify Instructional Methods**

Four techniques are recommended for modifying instructional methods: using concrete learning materials, using computer-assisted instruction, teaching one step at a time, and changing the modality by teaching to the seven types of intelligence.

##### Use Concrete Learning Materials

Many students learn best when they use materials that they see, feel, and manipulate. Over sixty years ago, Maria Montessori proved that youngsters considered failures by their parents and teachers could, with the right materials, succeed academically as well as their so-called brighter peers. To produce these spectacular results, Montessori designed and used concrete learning materials that met these criteria:

- Attractive—Students love working with materials that are interesting and colorful.
- Self-explanatory—Students are motivated to work when they can determine independently how the materials are used.
- Self-correcting—Students discover that making mistakes is natural and okay when no one else has to know how many errors they make while learning a new skill.
- Reusable—Students can practice tasks over and over again until they've achieved mastery.

Then the same materials can be used again to give children the joy of succeeding repeatedly.

Learning materials that meet Montessori's four criteria are readily available for today's classroom.

##### Use Computer-Based Instruction

Modern technology has provided an additional learning tool that adds a new dimension to teaching methods—the computer. Many students who wouldn't dream of picking up a pencil in class can sit for hours in front of a monitor, working on basic skills. Although not concrete, educational software does have the four characteristics of the Montessori learning materials.

Computers can't take our place, of course. And while all students can benefit from computer-assisted instruction, those who under-achieve for fear of failure are particularly helped by it. The self-explanatory, self-correcting, and reusable features enable such students to take risks that they'd never chance with traditional instructional materials.

### Teach One Step at a Time

Students who are afraid of failure are easily overwhelmed. They can be frightened into passivity by a complex learning task that's appropriate for their classmates. We can entice these students to tackle the task if we break it up into small, progressive steps so that the chance of making errors is reduced. We can further help them by giving feedback after they complete each step. Each small success will spur them on, and each small mistake will be easier to correct than multiple mistakes involving the whole task.

### Teach to the Seven Intelligences

Picture yourself being forced to write with your nondominant hand for an extended period of time. Wouldn't it be a painful experience? Some of our students are experiencing "painful learning" when being taught only in our traditional educational delivery system, which consists of teaching mainly to the verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences.

Howard Gardner has identified seven modes of intelligence and has recommended that we teach to all seven to help students succeed. Finding the dominant mode of intelligence and switching to strategies that emphasize it helps a student with avoidance-of-failure behavior overcome discouragement. Some examples of teaching strategies and activities to accommodate each of the seven intelligences are:

- verbal/linguistic: journals, discussions, debates, television, computers, guest speakers, dramatic readings, jokes
- logical/mathematical: graphic organizers, outlines, analogies, problem-solving, mnemonics, research, labs, formulas
- visual/spatial: posters, charts, graphics, painting, drawing, demonstrations, computers, videos, television
- body/kinesthetic: role playing, creative movement and dance, field trips, physical exercise, games, projects
- musical/rhythmic: singing, raps, poems, cheers, limericks, choral reading, instruments
- intrapersonal: reflection, journals, independent assignments, thinking strategies, goal setting
- interpersonal: cooperative learning, group projects, interviews, cooperative games, joint storytelling, class meetings

Periodically integrating activities using the seven intelligences invites more students to work in their learning comfort zone. It exposes them to activities that might pique their interest and uncovers aptitudes in areas previously unexplored.

### **Strategy 2: Provide Tutoring**

Many students who exhibit avoidance-of-failure behavior are caught in a failure chain. They have missed learning some basic academic skills, and this gap in skills makes schoolwork difficult and frustrating. Moreover, these students have lost confidence in trying to close the gap because they see classmates completing assignments with ease. As their confidence slips, so

does their motivation, which leads to continued poor performance and more erosion of confidence.

At this point, the students can do little on their own to break the failure chain. Their best hope is tutoring in basic skills, which breaks the chain by erasing the gap, restoring confidence, and encouraging success. Five forms of tutoring are most beneficial for students who fear failure:

- extra help from teachers
- remediation programs
- adult volunteer programs
- peer tutoring
- commercial learning centers

### **Strategy 3: Encourage Positive Self-Talk**

Students with avoidance-of-failure behavior often develop a pattern of negative self-talk. When faced with tasks, they may repeatedly think, “It’s too hard” or “I’ll never get this right.” Such damaging put-downs can become self-fulfilling prophecies that stifle students’ initiative and motivation. We can help students turn negative internal messages into positive self-talk by using several techniques.

#### Post Positive Classroom Signs

“You can if you think you can!” was the message on the sign posted by Mrs. Jones, my ninth-grade algebra teacher way back when. I read that sign every day, and its positive words gradually began to counter my subconscious belief that I’d never do well in algebra. Little by little, the impact of my own negative self-talk was reduced, and my willingness to persevere with mathematics increased.

Plastering our classroom walls with positive self-talk signs takes little effort. Students can be asked to write—and perhaps illustrate—a number of such signs that can be rotated on a regular basis. Here are some possible messages for the signs:

- I can do it!
- With a little effort, I’ll succeed.
- I’m smart enough to do good work.
- I can when I tell myself I can.
- I can change how I think and feel.

#### Require Two “Put-Ups” for Every Put-Down

Initiate the rule that for every negative statement students say aloud about themselves, they must counter with two “put-ups,” or positive statements. Such a practice not only helps students focus on the way they talk about themselves but also helps transform a negative self-image into a positive one. At first, students may feel a little foolish verbalizing good things about themselves. But with time and practice, put-ups usually become just as automatic as put-downs. And when this happens, the fear of failure diminishes.

#### Encourage Positive Self-Talk Before Tasks

The “tape recorder” in student’s heads begins playing as soon as an assignment is given. To ensure that the tape played is positive, we can ask students with avoidance-of-failure behavior



to say aloud two positive things about the task at hand before they set out to tackle it: “I can do these problems with fractions” and “I’m smart enough to find all the answers.”

If students get bogged down during the assignment, we can suggest that they repeat their positive statements under their breath. Students who learn consciously to “replay” the positive tape when they feel threatened by a task will usually achieve success. That success will make it easier to “eject” the negative tape and to insert the positive tape whenever they’re dealing with an assignment.

#### **Strategy 4: Reframe the “I Can’t” Refrain**

“I can’t” is a favorite refrain of students who fear failure. When presented with a task that seems the least bit difficult, they quickly give up and give in to this erroneous belief. Psychologists use the term *reframing* to mean changing perspective, taking a different point of view. We help students reframe their “I can’ts” in a couple of ways.

##### State Your Belief in Students’ Abilities

Disagree with students’ negative statement. Make responses such as:

- “Of course you can. How can I help you?”
- “Please repeat after me: ‘I can’t right now but I’m willing to learn how.’”
- “You have the ability. Now add some effort and your ‘I can’t’ will become ‘I can.’”

##### Stage an “I Can’t” Funeral

The book *Chicken Soup for the Soul* contains a marvelous description of a funeral conducted by a fourth-grade teacher:

The students are asked to fill a notebook page with “I can’ts,” a list of all the tasks they believe they cannot do. The lists go into a box that is then literally buried in the dirt in the schoolyard, with a headstone and an epitaph that reads “I can’t. RIP.” In her eulogy, the teacher talks about the surviving siblings, “I will” and “I’m going to right away.”

I envision the crypt for “I can’t” like those in New Orleans. Because that city is below sea level, family crypts are built above the ground and can be opened to admit the remains of family members as they pass on. As new “I can’ts” creep into the classroom, they can be quickly buried and placed in the crypt with their “ancestors.”

While secondary students might balk at the idea of an actual burial, they could write a play, produce a puppet show, or create a documentary or an ad campaign that illustrates these ideas. They can also take it one step further and present the work to elementary students.

#### **Strategy 5: Teach Procedures for Becoming “Unstuck”**

Everyone gets stuck at times, not knowing how to accomplish the task at hand. Teaching students procedures for becoming “unstuck” empowers them to continue working rather than quitting.

##### Brainstorm Ask-for-Help Gambits

A *gambit* is an opening move, a beginning, a strategy. Some students stay stuck because they don’t know how to begin to ask for help, especially in ways that don’t attract unwanted attention from peers. During a class discussion or meeting, brainstorm with your students gambits they can use when help is needed. Do they simply want to raise their hands? use some other signal? sign their name on a clipboard on your desk?

### Use Sequence Charts

Depending upon our subject area, we can identify and chart a sequence of steps students can follow when they don't understand an assignment. The steps might include such things as rereading the directions, underlining key words, or doing the first two problems. As with the ask-for-help gambits, the more the students are involved in creating these sequence charts, the less afraid they'll feel when they do get stuck.

### **Five Additional Intervention Strategies: An Overview**

Five intervention strategies that are also encouragement strategies useful with all students are especially helpful in working with those who fear failure.

### Make Mistakes Okay

The fear of making mistakes keeps students stuck in the avoidance-of-failure rut. They interpret every mistake, no matter how small, as proof that they can't do anything right—ever. We can help them learn to accept mistakes as part of the learning process.

### Build Confidence

Building confidence means helping students who fear failure realize that success is possible. They need to believe they not only can perform tasks capably but also are successful just being themselves, regardless of their skill level.

### Focus on Past Successes

Every student has experienced some success. We may have to dig deep to find examples for students who avoid failure. But by repeatedly reminding these students of past successes, no matter how small, we can build a basis for effort that may lead to major achievements.

### Make Learning Tangible

If they can't see or touch something, many students think it doesn't exist. Unfortunately, "learning" is something that's hard to see or touch. For students who need sensory feedback to realize that learning has occurred, we have to make learning as tangible as possible.

### Recognize Achievement

If students were to receive as much recognition for achievement as they do for failure, avoidance-of-failure behavior could be eliminated. Achievement or improvement in any area needs to be acknowledged. When students fearful of failure receive recognition from others, especially from teachers and classmates, they begin to feel capable and to believe that they can successfully connect and contribute.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Helping Students Feel Capable**

If our discipline program were to include only intervention strategies for the moment of misbehavior, we could be pretty sure that students would misbehave again—today, tomorrow, or the next day. The only way to end the misbehavior permanently is to raise students' self-esteem. The building blocks of self-esteem are the same Three C's that help students feel they belong. When students believe they're *capable* and know they can *connect* and *contribute* successfully, they no longer need to engage in misbehavior to try to fulfill their need to belong.

We can teach students to satisfy the Three C's through using encouragement strategies. Our positive response to appropriate behavior can do more to convince students to continue such behavior than will all the interventions in the world. Fortunately, most encouragement strategies are neither difficult nor time-consuming. We simply need to be aware of them and committed to using them daily.

As we implement encouragement strategies, we need to recognize that an important variable affects our ability to give encouragement—our emotional response toward a particular misbehavior. For example, giving lots of encouragement to students who fear failure is usually not difficult. These students don't disrupt our classroom, so our response to them is sympathetic. We naturally want to help them. On the other hand, giving even a normal level of encouragement to power-seeking students may seem challenging indeed. This is because our emotional response to these students is negative. If we keep in mind that our emotional response varies according to the behavior that's occurring at the moment, we will feel less discouraged as we try to encourage all our students.

While encouragement is important for all, some areas in which it can play an especially powerful role are worth noting.

#### Drop-out Prevention

One of the most important factors in drop-out prevention is the amount of academic success a student experiences in middle school. The more we incorporate into our classroom's daily life these strategies to help students feel capable, the more successful students become.

#### Inclusion of Special-Needs Students

Imagine you are a special-needs student who has just entered a mainstream classroom for the first time. Look around. You'll observe many classmates doing tasks that you haven't yet begun to learn. How discouraging that must feel! Yet, to succeed in this placement, you need to feel just as capable as everyone else. While the strategies in this chapter will help all students feel capable, they are especially important in the mainstreamed classroom.

#### Violence Protection

Young people who find no success in the academic area are prone to look elsewhere for the satisfaction that comes from succeeding. Unfortunately, all too many students find that they are extremely capable at fighting, stealing, vandalizing, and other forms of antisocial and criminal behavior. To reduce and prevent violence, therefore, we need to use as many of the

strategies in this chapter as we can, as often as we can—especially with violence-prone students who seek revenge.

## **Motivator of Success: The “I-Can” Level**

One of the most accurate predictors of success in school is a student’s “I-can” level. The I-can level is a much more helpful motivator than the IQ level. With appropriate teaching, students who believe in their ability to master required learning tasks will usually succeed. Their success is not only academic but also emotional. They feel good about themselves because they’ve fulfilled one of the Three C’s—feeling capable.

Students with disabilities and special needs tend to have a low I-can level. As this level rises, so does the probability that these young people will reach their full potential. We can work toward raising all students’ I-can levels by using the encouragement techniques described in this chapter. The techniques are grouped according to five major strategies.

### **Strategy 1: Make Mistakes Okay**

The fear of making mistakes undermines a student’s I-can level. When we remove this fear, we remove a great barrier to feeling capable. Several effective techniques can help us do this.

#### Talk About Mistakes

Young people are often selective in their observations. They notice their own mistakes but not those of others. As a result, they become convinced that everyone else is better, smarter, and more capable than they. Our job is to revise this viewpoint by helping students understand that everyone makes mistakes.

When students begin to talk about mistakes, they soon discover that mistakes are a natural—and integral—part of the learning process. The game of “Classroom Password” provides an easy format for initiating such discussion. When the bell rings to signal lunch or to change classes, we can stand at the door and announce that the password for leaving is to state one recent mistake. Any mistake will do, whether it occurred at home, on the bus, or in class.

At first, students probably won’t appreciate this game. Since failure is so rarely talked about in the open, some students will be fearful of revealing their mistakes in front of others. To understand that their fear is groundless, students need to hear us admitting that we make mistakes too. By sharing our own mistakes with students, we can help them recognize that blunders are a normal part of everyone’s life.

Once both we and our students become used to talking about mistakes, we can narrow the focus of the password: “Name one mistake you made in social studies and what you learned from that mistake. I’ll start: I should have remembered that reference book I promised to bring to class.”

#### Equate Mistakes With Effort

We need to acknowledge that more mistakes are made by active people than by passive people and that active participation is desirable. Then we can actually reward mistakes with enthusiastic remarks, thus motivating students to continue working. Comments like these are appropriate when students who are really trying to make mistakes:

- “You’ve make a mistake. So what? Now you know what to focus on. Let’s see what can be learned from it.”

- “This mistake is no big deal. After all, if you never make a mistake in English, I wouldn’t have a job!”

### Minimize Mistakes’ Effects

Correcting mistakes in students’ schoolwork is part of our job. Yet to help students feel capable, we need to minimize the effect of making mistakes. To do this, we need to stop highlighting every error. Red-lined papers can be overwhelming to students, especially those who already have low self-esteem and feel incapable.

This doesn’t mean that we can’t give constructive criticism and ask students to correct mistakes. It just means that we begin the task of correction by breaking it down into easy steps that students are capable of completing. We can do this by having students focus on correcting only one or two errors or types of errors at a time.

### **Strategy 2: Build Confidence**

Students must feel confident that success is possible. To help them build such confidence, we can use a number of techniques that emphasize positive feedback.

### Focus on Improvement

If we wait until a student completes a task error-free before we say anything positive, we’re likely to wait forever. If instead we devote more interest to the *process* of learning rather than the *product*, we’ll notice and praise each small step forward.

When we note a student’s improvement, we focus only on what the student can do tomorrow. We don’t compare the student’s work with anyone else’s or with grade-level charts.

### Notice Contributions

Students who fear failure may resist putting anything down on paper, because any errors will be permanently recorded for all to see. Their fear may not extend beyond the edge of the paper, however. Such students often are willing to participate actively in class discussions and group tasks. We can point out the usefulness of these contributions to the students, their classmates, and their families. Since being able to contribute is one of the Three C’s of belonging, we need to notice and encourage this behavior as much as possible.

### Build on Strengths

Every student has some strength, no matter how well hidden. We noted earlier the importance of seeking the good in each student if we are to build healthy relationships. Likewise, we can seek out strengths on which to build academic skills. When we notice the gold shining through, we can tell the students directly or write it down on their papers. They need to hear about their strengths frequently and in detail.

While growing up, many of us were told that we’d get a “swelled head” if we bragged or said complimentary things about ourselves. What nonsense! If we can’t talk about what we can do well, how can we possibly feel capable? The ability to recognize and talk about our strengths is a powerful motivator and self-esteem builder. We can help students focus on their strengths by playing a variation of Classroom Password, asking each student to mention a personal strength, positive characteristic, or talent before exiting the classroom at the end of the period or the day.

### Show Faith in Students

Our faith in our students is reflected in our expectations. Low expectations demonstrate low confidence. Higher expectations indicate more confidence, as long as the expectations are realistic and the lessons appropriate. To demonstrate sincere faith in our students' capabilities, we can tailor activities to their abilities. Moreover, positive comments such as "You can handle it," "You are the kind of students who can do this," and "I know you can do it" indicate our faith in our students.

### Acknowledge a Task's Difficulty

Many students, especially those trying to avoid failure, perceive any new learning task as difficult. We need to acknowledge their point of view. One way to do this is to avoid making light of a task by labeling it "easy." If students do fail at such an "easy" task, they naturally assume that they must be stupid. Instead, we need to support students' feelings while affirming their capabilities: "I know this is difficult. Keep at it a while longer. I bet you'll get the hang of it." When students do succeed at a task that we've labeled "difficult," their self-esteem gets a healthy boost.

### Set Time Limits on Tasks

When students know that work they perceive as difficult is not going to last forever, the task can seem easier to bear. If students want to continue working after the time is up, we can of course encourage them to do so. Our goal is to create a reasonable minimum time frame and thereby ease the stress that comes from facing difficult tasks.

### **Strategy 3: Focus on Past Successes**

When I was growing up, my parents and teachers frequently pointed out what I was doing wrong, with the hope of motivating me to do better in the future. Today, many educational psychologists tell us that just the opposite is true. The way to motivate young people to succeed is to point out everything they do right. Success builds success, we are told, and we therefore should focus on students' past accomplishments to ensure that their good work continues.

### Analyze Past Success

We need to do more than just point out successes, says Bernard Weiner, developer of the attribute theory of success. Weiner states that most of us attribute our successes to five factors: our belief in our ability, our effort, help from others, a task's difficulty, and luck. Students control only two of these factors—*their belief in their ability* and *the amount of effort they put out*. They cannot dictate how much help they will receive from others, how difficult the task will be, or whether luck will be on their side.

We can help students understand that the two factors they do control are the major components of success. We can ask them, "Do you know why you succeeded at that task?" If they reply that it was because they have "smarts" or tried so hard, we can reinforce their perceptions by agreeing with them. If their response is that it was because they got help, we can counter, "Yes, that's true, you did get help. But you put out the effort and proved you have the ability." If they say that the task was easy, we can respond, "Your ability and effort made it seem easy." If they claim it was just luck, we can say, "You make your own luck by using your ability and making the effort."

We can also challenge students to repeat the task again so they can prove to themselves that they created their own success. By continually analyzing past successes in this way, we not only help students believe in their own capabilities but also encouraging them to keep making the effort to learn.

### Repeat Past Success

While moving forward to new learning tasks is important, standing still for a moment, savoring and repeating today's successes, is equally important. A familiar classroom phenomenon lends credibility to this observation—the enthusiasm that students display for doing old worksheets over and over again. Whether the task is worksheets or other types of assignments, when students have an opportunity to repeat yesterday's work, they use skills they have mastered, therefore making fewer mistakes and experiencing more success.

### **Strategy 4: Make Learning Tangible**

One reason why some students don't believe in their capabilities is because they can't see their progress. Grades and test scores, the usual benchmarks for measuring progress, don't always give the necessary information. For example, a student who receives C's for two consecutive marking periods might assume that no progress has been made. Young elementary students often receive only "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" marks, which reveal nothing about their progress. We need to switch from "Whadja get?" to "Whadja learn?"

### "I-Can" Cans

Young students can make "I-Can" cans by decorating large, empty coffee cans with construction paper or adhesive paper. In their cans, they deposit strips of paper on which they've written skills they've mastered, such as reading or spelling words and arithmetic facts. As their cans fill up, students can point with pride to all the new things they've learned. The I-Can can is also useful during parent conferences because it contains concrete evidence that a child is making progress.

### Accomplishment Albums and Portfolios

Older students can create an accomplishment album or portfolio using a three-ring binder, paper, theme dividers, and decorations such as stickers and glitter. They can label the sections with headings such as "Math Problems I Can Solve," "Books I Have Read," or "French Verbs I Can Conjugate." Students can chart their progress by writing down new skills as they are mastered. The album concept also works well for just one subject area, with the headings reflecting appropriate categories for the subject. For example, an eighth-grade student's English album might include "New Vocabulary I've Mastered," "Grammar and Punctuation Rules I've Learned," "Literature I've Read," and "Writing Skills I've Demonstrated." A large manila envelope can be attached to the binder to hold examples of written work and art projects.

Students should never compare their accomplishment albums. The emphasis should be solely on individual growth, helping students see what they learned today that they didn't know yesterday. Accomplishment albums also are great aids during parent conferences since they are tangible records of student progress.

### Checklists of Skills

Many schools have established master lists of skills to be taught in each subject at each grade level. Teachers generally use these lists when preparing lessons and when writing reports on student progress for parents. Such checklists also are ideal for helping students feel capable. With each new skill they can check off, their I-can level rises.

### Flowchart of Concepts

A flowchart accompanies just about every commercially published academic program. The chart lists concepts and skills introduced in the program and describes where and when they appear. Most teachers use the flowchart primarily to plan lessons, but it can also be used in helping students plot progress. A chart may need to be simplified for use by young students, but even they can benefit from knowing where they are going, when they will get there, and which milestones they will pass along the way.

### Talks About Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Useful in conjunction with any of the techniques suggested for Strategy 4 are frequent talks about yesterday, today, and tomorrow. For example, we can say to a student, “Remember when you weren’t able to spell many words? Now look at how many words you have inside you I-Can can!” When we discuss the progress a student has made in such concrete terms, we increase confidence and self-esteem immeasurably. Moreover, failure doesn’t seem so scary—or so inevitable—when we talk frequently about progress.

### **Strategy 5: Recognize Achievement**

For students to continue to want to make progress, they must receive recognition from others for the progress they’ve already made. Here are some effective techniques for acknowledging achievements.

### Applause

Applause says, “Hooray for you! You did it!” When we give applause, we don’t have to clap our hands, but our enthusiasm ought to be no less evident. We can applaud achievement in school and out, in both academic and nonacademic areas. Applause needs to be specific and nonjudgmental, without comparisons, and with no mention of past or future expectations.

One of the best ways to give applause is simply to notice the situation and reflect it back to the student:

- “Wow, Monica, look at how clearly you’ve outlined the causes leading up to the Civil War.”
- “Congratulations, Paulo! I see your sketch was selected for the all-school exhibit.”

Applause is called for whenever students exhibit positive behavior in a situation that previously caused them difficulty. For example, we notice that Monroe, who has been withdrawn in phys. ed., is finally taking an active part in a game. We can reinforce the good example he is setting for himself by saying, “Way to go, Monroe! I saw you cheering your teammates on while you waited for your turn.”

### Clapping and Standing Ovations

We can encourage students to recognize classmates’ achievements by clapping and giving standing ovations. The recipient feels noticed, appreciated, and special. Most students love taking center stage, even for just a moment. It costs nothing, takes little time, provides a change of pace, and releases pent-up energy for the entire class.



### Stars and Stickers

Young students love the recognition represented by stars and stickers. A happy face on a worksheet or a big golden star stuck on a shirt collar says, "I've noticed your achievement, and I'm proud of you." Do use stars and stickers sparingly so that students don't perceive them as the major reward for a job well done.

### Awards and Assemblies

All kinds of certificates and awards can be given out in homeroom, at lunch, or during assemblies. The more achievements we find to notice, the more positive the classroom atmosphere and the school environment become. Remember, however, to recognize increased effort and improved performance, not just "the best." One clever teacher takes unclaimed sneakers from the lost and found, paints them gold, and presents them to deserving students as "The Golden Sneaker Award for Runaway Effort."

### Exhibits

By means of bulletin boards, display cases, and presentations in other classrooms, we can advertise students' achievements. We can also invite parents to view special exhibits of student work, and we can submit announcements of student achievements to the local newspaper.

### Positive Time-Out

Everyone knows that students sent to time-out in the principal's office are in trouble. This negative image of the school administrator can be changed if we start sending students to the office for positive time-out, or to receive recognition for achievement from the principal. We can also send students to counselors, librarians, learning specialists, or volunteers for recognition. Positive time-out is a particularly powerful technique to use with students who are afraid to fail. When these students receive recognition from staff members, their low opinion of themselves starts changing for the better.

Classroom teachers can provide another kind of positive time-out. Taking a moment at the end of class to talk alone with a student who deserves recognition is a powerful motivator. We could also take a few minutes during lunch, free periods, or after school to deliver such praise. We don't have to do anything fancy during positive time-out, and it needn't take long. It's our presence and our undivided attention that mean so much to a student. Even older students appreciate a teacher's attention, although many wouldn't admit it for fear of being labeled "teacher's pet."

### Self-Approval

Teaching students to recognize their own achievements is vital. Otherwise, students may become approval-dependent, waiting for others to notice what they've done instead of looking inside for self-approval. One way we can promote self-approval is by asking each student to state a personal accomplishment that's worthy of recognition. In time, students learn to enjoy the good feelings that spring from talking about their accomplishments.